

## Chapter One

The cave meant trouble, the kind that seeps into the world, envious and violent, so the shepherd feared it.

Why had his sheep dog darted into that hungry mouth?

A howl ripped the air.

Ehal cupped his hands and called. He watched the dark opening above the lake visible through the willow trees and reed canes. No dog.

Ehal had seen the black waters of the spring inside, the path the demons from the Underworld followed. The priestesses from the temple of Ishana whispered prayers to keep the world in harmony, but the old shepherd didn't know those prayers. He stayed away from that cave.

"Sacred tits of Ishana," Ehal swore, and then glanced hastily at his grandson.

Wasmu whistled for the dog, then started toward the rocky trail. "I'll get him, Grandpa. It's too steep for you."

"He'll come back." Ehal grabbed the boy's arm and drew him close. Whatever lurked in that cave made him tremble. The boy trembled, too.

Ehal glanced back toward Lawaza, the city beside the lake. No one out this early in the morning. The city gates remained closed, and the men from the cluster of huts where Ehal lived had already left for the fields. On this trail to the pasturage, he and Wasmu were alone.

The sheep crowded around his legs, pushing toward the clean scent of water. Ehal knew they'd stay, drinking, even without the dog, but he called again until a hacking cough stopped him.

Wasmu patted his grandfather's back until the old man straightened up.

"What about the dog?" The boy's voice quivered.

"You stay away from there." Ehal didn't want his grandson near whatever had drawn that dog. He'd see to it himself if he had to—much as he feared the place. He didn't understand how gods lived underneath—a whole world the priests said, with its own sun and all. He had peered into the upturned earth after a farmer's plow had cut through a field and hadn't seen a kingdom below, but he accepted the truth of it. It was just as well those gods below stayed out of sight. No reason to go prodding at their front door. Especially today, when the cave emitted something he had never known before—a vibration that entered his old bones.

His grandson shifted with impatience. He had picked up a willow branch and hit the ground with it in a nervous rhythm.

Ehal put his hand on Wasmu's twitchy shoulder and scanned the sky. The last of the night's stars still twinkled in a distinct rainbow of bright colors low on the horizon. Through the stars, the gods of this realm kept watch. Blue stars marked the sign of the Stormgod. Twin red stars, like crimson blood, belonged to Ishana, the goddess of love and war who protected Lawaza. Ehal found reassurance in the colored stars.

Wasmu wiggled free. Ehal reached out to grasp the boy, but caught only air.

The child launched up the hill, whipping his willow switch in front.

"Wait!" Ehal forced his stiff legs along the trail.

Wasmu looked back and yelled, "No Grandpa. I'll go."

Ehal pressed on. His breath rasped, and he bent over wheezing. That fool dog was going to be the death of him. He stood and struggled to catch up.

He trudged upwards, glancing between Wasmu and the city, hoping someone would appear on the road. The lower part of the city sprawled close to the lake, surrounded by a wooden palisade, but perched high on a broad hill, the stone walls protecting the citadel and temple towered over the landscape. They usually reassured Ehal with their massive stones cut so they locked around each other—like the people themselves of the city and farms, each gaining strength from the other. But not today. No one near. Ehal panted but forced himself ahead, determined to protect his grandson from this threat that crept from the Underworld.

Wasmu reached the cave.

The boy barely stopped before entering. Ehal raced forward as he had not done in years. A surge of indefinable evil thrust at him from the cave. He feared some disturbance had released the invisible demons who thrive on mortal suffering.

A moment later, Wasmu screamed and backed into the light.

He stumbled. His body convulsed, a string of bile ran down his chin.

Ehal closed the distance and wrapped his arms around his grandson. "What?"

The boy didn't answer. His panicked sobs jerked against Ehal's body.

Ehal wiped the child's face with a corner of his rough tunic. He loosened Wasmu's grip and set him at the side of the trail. "Wait here."

Ehal shivered as he stepped inside the cave, straining his eyes in the darkness. Early daylight angled a narrow wedge into the gloom, but a wisp of black mist hovered near the ground, spiraling from the spring. Dank rot made the air heavy, and unnatural cold shocked him. That kind of cold came from the Underworld.

In front of him, the gray herding dog stood stiff-legged, its hackles up, its narrow muzzle pointing at a misshapen form. Something loathsome and cruel had happened here, something that cried out for help.

The smell of burnt flesh gagged Ehal, but he stepped forward. What was left of a man lay face up, his head and shoulders propped by the stone pedestal of the altar. The man had fallen against it, one leg twisted grotesquely to the side. A short cloak tangled around an arm. Charred fragments of his tunic lay scattered over burned flesh. Ehal drew back from the blackened skin and an oozing hole where an eye should have been.

Wasmu pressed against his leg. Ehal jumped.

The dog growled. It sniffed the murky surface of the spring. Mist whorled up like boney fingers. The dog thrashed his head from side to side, as if shaking off a phantom hand that gripped the scruff of his neck, then recoiled from the mist and crept behind the boy.

Ehal's bones pulsed with pain that grew with each swirl of that black mist.

"Stay back," he said and pushed the boy toward the opening. "This time, do what I say."

The old man edged closer to the body. He wanted to leave but could not ignore the harm done to this man. Dried blood marked the man's blackened neck and arms. Runoff from the spring made the old man's feet slip. A drop fell on his cheek. Darkness flowed through the cave like a living presence.

"Will the gods come up through the spring?" Wasmu called.

"They might. Demons, more likely." Ehal crouched beside the body. "They're here already. Don't you feel it?"

"Do you feel it, too?"

Ehal nodded.

"Who is it?" the boy said.

"Can't tell." Ehal peered at the man's finely woven wool cloak. If this were a nobleman, he should report it, but he could not make out the pattern.

"Light would help." Wasmu pulled an unlit torch from a basket by the entrance.

“Don’t!” Ehal held up his hand.

“You need to see,” Wasmu said, gesturing past the spring and the altar. “Someone lit a fire back there.”

Ehal noticed the dying coals. “Strange.” He pointed with a shaking hand to the logs and kindling laid out on the altar. “That’s where the priestesses are meant to burn fire, not the ground. Perhaps this dead man lit that other fire to keep warm, but ... Shouldn’t have. The priestesses know what’s permitted in this sacred place.”

“But how did he get burnt? Did he fall in?”

The dog gave a low growl.

“Doesn’t seem likely.” Evil crept inside Ehal with each breath, restricting the flow of air.

On the altar a polished clay libation cup lay on its side, the stem broken and wine the color of blood smeared underneath. These were sacred objects but not as a priestess would use them. The more Ehal looked around, the more his unease grew. Upsetting the order of things brought disaster.

In the dank air, his chest tightened.

On the ground next to the altar someone had crushed dry clay underfoot, the mark of a sandal left behind. Ehal studied the clay, but it wasn’t part of the broken cup. There was a squared-off piece like the tablets the priests made marks on.

“Go outside, child, but first give me that torch.” He grabbed the torch and cast his other hand toward the entrance. “Go.”

He watched as his grandson crept out. Sunlight framed his body.

Ehal sidestepped the altar and body, and leaned to use the coals to light the torch. An ember landed on the back of his hand. He brushed it off, but it had burned his skin.

Ehal staggered back a step. He stared through the dimness at the burnt corpse and then lifted his gaze. In the cave’s opening, his grandson stood, his limbs stiff, his eyes stretched in pools of horror.

“Never mind, child. It’s not much.” He looked at his hand. Strangely, it didn’t hurt, but a red smear spread on his skin. He stepped toward the body.

He raised the light and shadows leapt. For a moment the corpse seemed to move.

The torch picked up the unusual design on the cloak, done in black wool on reddish brown the color of the walls of his hut. The women in his village didn't work cloth like that. A suspicious stranger.

Ehal went to the entrance and reached out his hand. "Give me your stick."

His grandson shied away from the tainted hand. With the stick, Ehal lifted the hem of the cloak and spread it wide enough to reveal a tree flanked by bulls and a series of unrecognizable symbols.

The smell of tar rose from the cloth, strong even over the stench of burnt flesh.

He scanned the ground around the body and recoiled from a black lump of bitumen, the size of a man's thigh. Even with its arms and legs partly melted, the tarry figure formed an evil effigy. The air knotting inside him turned clammy, a swirl of grasping fingers.

A hemp cord ran from the effigy to a pit beside the spring. He raised the torch higher. Another figure, this one the color of sand, lay at the bottom, more finely formed than the dark one. The torch tumbled from Ehal's hand, sizzling against the wet floor.

He ran toward the opening. "Ishana protect us."

He scuttled from the cave, pushing his grandson in front of him down the trail. Not even the dog noticed the horse and rider on the hill above them.